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ABSTRACT

Noting that school readiness--the preparedness of children to learn what is taught in schools--is the cornerstone of today's education reform movement, this article presents a brief overview of the key public factors that contribute to school readiness. These factors include both historical and contemporary American views of early learning as reflected by government funding, early learning and teacher education field practices, professionalization of early childhood teachers and improvement of education departments, and public policy as manifested by teacher certification and accountability. The article suggests that with the hindsight gained from historical knowledge and a clear understanding of the factors that contribute to school readiness, we are better equipped to make the first goal of today's educational reform a reality--that all children in America start school ready to learn. (Contains 35 references.) (Author/LLP)

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Public Factors That Contribute to School Readiness

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Abstract

Noting that school readiness—the preparedness of children to learn what is taught in schools—is the cornerstone of today's education reform, this article presents a brief overview of the key public factors that contribute to school readiness. These factors include both historical and contemporary American views of early learning as reflected by government funding, early learning and teacher education field practices, professionalization of early childhood teachers and improvement of education departments, and public policy as manifested by teacher certification and accountability. The article suggests that with the hindsight gained from historical knowledge and a clear understanding of the factors that contribute to school readiness, we are better equipped to make the first goal of today's educational reform a reality—that all children in America start school ready to learn.

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School readiness the preparedness of children to learn what schools expect or want them to learn is a cornerstone of today's education reforms. According to government studies, students are not entering school ready to learn in spite of education reforms that have been in place for over 10 years (Lewit & Baker, 1995). The concern over school readiness was brought to national attention by then-President George Bush and the state governors (which included then-Governor Bill Clinton) in 1991 through the America 2000 program (Lewit & Baker, 1995). America 2000, a federal initiative for K-12 education reform, identified as its first goal for the national agenda that by the year 2000 all children in America should start school ready to learn (Boyer, 1991). A recent survey conducted by the National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCEDL) of 3,600 teachers nationwide reported that 52% of children have a successful entry into kindergarten and 48% have moderate or serious problems ("Kindergarten Transitions," 1998).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 1995) describes three

prerequisites for universal school readiness: "1. addressing the inequities in early life experience so that all children have access to the opportunities that promote school success; 2. recognizing and supporting individual differences among children including linguistic and cultural differences; and 3. establishing reasonable and appropriate expectations of children's capabilities upon school entry." (These prerequisites are based on what is developmentally appropriate for children and therefore do not include mastery of numbers, shapes, and letters.) While family characteristics, nutrition, and health practices have been identified as primary factors in school readiness, the level of readiness with which our children begin school is also influenced by several external societal factors. These include our nation's historical and contemporary approaches to early learning, early learning and teacher education field practices, reforms to improve education departments and professionalize early childhood teachers, as well as public policy concerning certification of teachers and accountability. This article presents a brief overview of these key public issues (excluding family characteristics, nutrition, and health practices) that contribute to school readiness.

Historical and Contemporary Approaches to Early Learning: Government Funding as a Mirror

The colonial tradition of keeping young children at home remained prevalent in the United States until World War II, with the brief exception of the short-lived infant school movement that began in 1828. However, during the 1940s, when mothers were needed to work in defense industries, government became involved in child care. The Lanaham Act (1943) created federally sponsored child care centers that allowed mothers to work during the war. These centers remained in operation until after the war to provide jobs for the vast numbers of unemployed teachers, social workers, and nurses. Thus, the support of child care by the government was strictly "an answer to a war problem" (Cahan, 1989, p. 43). From the 1950s through the 1990s, government-sponsored day care continued as a social welfare system to strengthen the family life of the poor and to move people from welfare to work. In contrast, private early learning programs for those who can afford them emphasize education gains for children and research-based parenting resources for families.

The historical view of early learning as a family responsibility is evident today in less-than-adequate government support of child care services. Certain early intervention programs, such as Head Start and High Scope, measurably benefit targeted children and families, and they have generated savings to the government that exceed the costs of the programs (Karoly et al., 1998).

The cost savings that result from these and other similar programs are long-term gains that are actualized when the children have graduated from high school, and they and their caretakers become productive, employed members of society (Karoly et al., 1998). Whether or not the public will continue to support programs whose gains are so delayed is yet to be determined. In 1991, because of a lack of federal funding, only one-third of all children eligible for Head Start received services (Boyer, 1991). And in 1996, the Welfare Reform Law increased the demand for full-time child care services in every state (Center for the Child Care Workforce, 1998) without providing resources to meet the needs of all "at-risk" children.

When the much-needed federal funding was appropriated, however, Head Start enrollment statistics did not change perhaps due to the need for full-time day care as opposed to half-day programs. In 1998, approximately one-third of eligible children were enrolled in Head Start (Kirchhoff, 1998), and the program was criticized for not reaching more families and for qualitative weakness in the areas of curriculum and teacher training. The Clinton Administration is addressing these issues and has allocated

funding to meet its goal of enrolling 1 million children by the year 2002. The bulk of the new Head Start funding is for qualitative improvements, such as teacher training (Kirchhoff, 1998). But how much spending is enough and where should the money be invested?

A comparison of public spending on early learning programs in the United States with other similarly developed countries indicates that the United States has more resources for providing educational services yet provides fewer (Svestka, 1995). For example, France provides free schooling beginning at age 3. French preschool teachers hold the equivalent of a master's degree in early childhood development, and students of preschool education receive a stipend and free college education if they agree to teach for 5 years. In Belgium, all 4-year-olds and 95% of 3-year-olds are in public schools; in Italy, 87% of 3- to 5-year-olds are in school. The figures are almost identical for Spain, Hong Kong, and [West] Germany (Hymes, 1991). And in Denmark, the government subsidizes child care for children from 6 months to age 7, with trained professional teachers in each classroom and low child-to-teacher ratios. The quality of care is reported as uniformly high (Congressional Quarterly, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c).

Not everyone agrees that government should be more involved. Some conservative groups believe the current child care system in the United States is adequate. For example, the Cato Institute released a report calling for Congress to resist increasing funding for child care and not to impose federal standards (Olsen, 1997). In addressing the cost issue, the Cato Institute points to a national survey indicating that 96% of parents are satisfied with their child care arrangements, parent costs for child care have risen less than 5% since 1970, and the supply of child care has kept up with the demand. Unfortunately, the cost of early childhood programs is often subsidized by staff accepting low wages and not receiving benefits they might receive in other jobs (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). In responding to the regulatory issues, the Cato Institute argues that parents can distinguish between low- and high-quality care and that while regulations and standards do not guarantee excellence, national standards would abrogate parental care-taking responsibility (Olsen, 1997). However, research conducted by the Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Study Team (1995) indicates that selecting high-quality care is an issue of access and availability and not a question of parental judgment.

Early Learning and Teacher Education Field Practices

Research on early learning indicates that (1) early experience has lasting effects, (2) early childhood is the critical period of neurological development, (3) all children enter early childhood programs with active minds, and (4) early childhood is the critical period in social development (Katz, 1997). Because of these conclusions, school readiness has been identified as the highest priority of education reform.

Studies over the past three decades have also shown that good, research-based early learning programs enhance later achievement and social adjustment, reduce the likelihood of retention, increase graduation rates, and reduce placement in special needs classes (Barnett, 1995; Entwisle, 1995). But the actual quality of preschool education in the United States is mixed at best.

Current national research shows that of every 10 center-based programs, 2 provide high-quality care, 7 provide mediocre care, and 1 jeopardizes the health and safety of children (Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Study Team, 1995; Kagan & Cohen, 1997). At the same time that the nation has identified school readiness as a problem, the percentage of 3- and 4-year-olds enrolled in nursery schools has reached 48% (Chagani, 1996). Nursery schools are governed by the same standards as preschool programs; however, nursery schools typically have a lower staff turnover rate and provide better compensation for teachers because of their part-time schedule and the cost savings resulting from no provision of benefits.

Through better opportunities for field placement, improved early learning programs could help preschool teacher education as well as children. A broad base of research indicates that effective practices in early learning programs include frequent verbal and educational interactions between teacher and child, teacher training that is balanced in child development, and some degree of professional teaching experience in early learning programs (Clarke-Stewart, 1987). Many researchers have identified student teaching during the practicum experience as the most valuable aspect of teacher education programs (McLanahan, 1992). Increased access to high-caliber early learning programs for field practices is required to improve student teaching experiences (Chagani, 1996). Another study points to the importance of consistency in the early learning workforce and retention of teachers through better training and appropriate compensation (Center for the Child Care Workforce, 1998). The low percentage (20%) of good to excellent early learning programs available to children (Kagan & Cohen, 1997) and the high percentage (48%) of children entering kindergarten who are determined by their teachers to be underprepared for school (Chagani, 1996) suggest that improving field practices could have a major impact on young children's preparedness to start school.

Reforms: Professionalizing Early Childhood Teachers and Improving Education Departments

Among the remedies for improving the quality of early learning programs, excellent training and appropriate compensation for teachers is crucial (Katz, 1997). However, child care workers are among the lower paid of all classes of workers in the United States (NCEDL, 1997). Although research shows that there is a positive relationship between the education and consistency of staff and the quality of care, only a small percentage of child care teachers have four-year or advanced degrees, and the staff turnover rate is as high as 25% to 50% per year (NCEDL, 1997). But a new development is changing these conditions. When preschool programs are part of public schools, preschool teachers have the same certification requirements as K-12 teachers and are perceived to have the important responsibility of preparing their students for success within the school system (Goffin & Day, 1994). In 1991, 15% of all school districts offered classes for 4-year-olds in American public schools (Boyer, 1991). According to the Children's Defense Fund, 21 states increased aid for pre-kindergarten or Head Start in 1997 (Kirchhoff, 1998). Edward Zigler, director of the Bush Center in Child Development and Social Policy at Yale University, reported that 30-31 states now have some form of pre-kindergarten program as compared to 1980, when there were only 10 states with pre-kindergarten initiatives (Cocyman, 1998). As this number continues to rise, so will the demand for highly skilled early childhood graduates capable of passing state teaching certification exams. Laws such as the Higher Education Reauthorization Act of 1998 (Report 05-750), which offers loan forgiveness for child care providers, contribute to the professionalization of preschool teachers.

University and college education departments, often overshadowed by other departments that require specialized technological skills, have responded to education reform by raising admission standards in hopes of attracting better-qualified students and thereby increasing the departments' status within colleges and universities (Goodlad, Soder, & Sirotnik, 1990, Clifford & Guthrie, 1988). But in order to attain true educational reform, not only must standards be raised for students training to be teachers, but standards must also be raised for the teachers who are providing the training (Lively, 1998). The revitalization of teacher education requires a simultaneous revival of schools as places where teachers are taught, because teachers teach as they were taught in schools and colleges and pass their ways along to their students (Goodlad, Soder, & Sirotnik, 1990; Goffin & Day, 1994). Thus, a thorough exploration

of traditional models for training early childhood teachers practiced in colleges and universities today is needed to evaluate their congruence with research-based teaching practices that foster school readiness.

Public Policy: Certification of Teachers and Accountability

Public policy, the driving force of funding and regulations for all levels of education (Karoly et al., 1998), is yet another factor that has a critical impact on both school readiness and teacher training. Public policy is created when problems, policies, and politics come together at the right time (Kingdon, 1995). One problem that is currently driving public policy is the debate over teacher certification. For early childhood teachers, teacher certification may well be another step toward professionalizing the field. More-qualified and better-paid teachers would certainly enhance the learning opportunities for children.

Of course, not all states require teachers to pass certification exams. In 1997, six states did not use a test for teacher licensing and had no plans to do so in the near future (National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification, 1998). And states that require teacher exams vary considerably in teacher licensure standards. States establish individual standards for licensure test passing cutoff points, their choice of tests (if any), their test re-take policy, and which states' teacher licensures they recognize (Gitomer, Latham, & Ziomek, 1999). Even states that use the same teacher test have different standards. For example, the passing scores established for the Early Childhood Education Praxis exams by 15 states showed a 120-point range of scores, with the lowest acceptable passing score of 480 for Ohio and the highest acceptable passing score of 600 for both Florida and Oregon. Based on 6,804 examinees, the average test performance range is 600-700 (Educational Testing Service, 1998-1999). The lowest score within the average performance range is the same as the highest cutoff score and 120 points more than the lowest acceptable cutoff score. These results could indicate that the exam is extremely challenging and therefore requires a low cutoff score or that the exam is not challenging enough based on the high average passage rates.

Despite the lack of consistency in selection, application, and interpretation of tests across institutes and state certification agencies, some local governments and the media have used low passage rates to portray teachers as incompetent. As a result, schools of education have lost credibility nationally and are in danger of losing their own certification if their rates of students passing the certification tests do not improve (Lively, 1998). Higher education is challenged to provide early childhood teacher training models that will (1) enable students to pass teacher certification exams, (2) provide students with the skills needed to foster school readiness in preschool children, and (3) work collaboratively and closely with local early childhood programs to increase the quality of care for children and to help shape public perception of early childhood teachers as professionals.

Teachers of questionable academic ability, a shortage of teacher candidates, a high turnover rate, a predominately white female population, and use of state emergency licensing procedures to fill the vacancy gaps all these characterize current K-12 teaching conditions (Gitomer, Latham, & Ziomek, 1999). To a great extent, these characteristics are true for pre-kindergarten teaching today as well, although, because certification is not required and financial compensation is low in nonpublic school nursery and preschool programs, job turnover rates are greater and teachers' academic ability is more questionable.

As an accountability measure, Congress approved legislation requiring state reporting of teacher licensure exams from individual institutions, as well as comparative descriptions of teacher licensure

assessments, state passing scores, and the pass rate and rank by institution (Otuya, 1998). Although it seems simple, the reporting task is complex because of the individual authority of each state and institution. Because procedures and exams vary by state as well as by institution, standardized definitions and uniform reporting methods will be crucial to understanding the reports (Gitomer, Latham, & Ziomek, 1999). During this period of demand for accountability, a full review of the literature on teacher certification exams and outcomes is needed to understand the success of traditional early learning programs in providing graduates who pass state certification exams and thus contribute to the increasing professionalization of early learning teachers.

Certification of teachers is the area of higher education in which the state has the greatest control (Goodlad, Soder, & Sirotnik, 1990). Because there is a wide disparity between the academic skills and knowledge required of teachers in content areas and those in elementary or early childhood education, when approaching issues that refer to teachers, it is important to identify which group of teachers is being referenced. Moreover, because the policies and licensure procedures vary widely from state to state, in addressing teacher licensure issues, it is crucial to ground the discussion within the context of individual states. Review of the certification literature would provide a lens to look at public policy from both ends of the educational spectrum early childhood schooling and college-level teacher training.

Summary

By examining the historical and contemporary American views of early learning, early learning field practices, teacher training programs, and public policy around early learning and teacher training, we are better equipped to make the cornerstone of today's educational reform a reality. Identifying the factors that are congruent and working well now will allow for the continued development of these areas when the public agenda shifts. Evidence suggests that traditional early learning teacher training programs in colleges of education do produce teachers who are successful in passing state licensure examinations, but the typical cutoff score is very low. Although research has defined characteristics of high-quality early learning programs, successful teacher training modules exist, and vehicles for professionalizing the field are in place, our society settles for preschool teachers who will work under poor conditions for minimum pay. Additional research is needed to determine how to best utilize the resources of higher education, local communities, and the state and federal government to ensure high-quality early learning for all children and to change the current climate of low standards and rewards for early childhood teachers (Karoly et al., 1998).

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